

Op-ed: Ensure high-speed rail is on the right track

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For many months, the people of the 14th Congressional District have been worried - and justifiably so - about what high-speed rail could mean to their communities. Now comes word of financial difficulties that threaten the future of Caltrain, the spine of the Peninsula transportation system and the little train that could, and does so much, to serve us.

We can see this as one problem piled on another. Or we can see this as an opportunity to protect and improve Caltrain and to deliver a message to the California High Speed Rail Authority that its trains will come to the Peninsula when - and if - it can prove that it will mean a better community and better transit.

That the High Speed Rail Authority needs to prove itself is beyond any doubt. Authority representatives - many of them well meaning - have proven repeatedly to be ineffective and even counterproductive in the way they have approached the project and the public. Frankly, they could not have been better at damaging their own credibility and the credibility of the project if they had planned it.

The California State Auditor's office recently issued a scathing report, detailing poor planning, inadequate risk assessment and a flawed business plan. The saddest fact? No one was surprised by it.

The High Speed Rail Authority has to hit the reset button, improve its reputation and assuage Peninsula residents, who have every reason to fear that this project will be a nightmare. Meanwhile, we have to state with one, clear voice that a lot will have to happen before - or if - high-speed rail is going to operate on the Peninsula.

We will need to see a credible plan for financing the project. We will need to see a credible business plan for operating the system. We will need proof that those in charge of designing the project have heard our concerns.

We need to see what high-speed rail will do for us, not only to us. In other words, we need high-speed rail on the Peninsula to be a betterment, not a detriment. One of the betterments we expect is an improved Caltrain, and that is something that can be done right now.

In February, the Federal Railroad Administration awarded \$2.25 billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds to California's high-speed-rail project. Part of the California High Speed Rail Authority request for funds was to advance the Caltrain electrification and modernization plans.

We can start that project today, and that's why we need our fair share of recovery-act funds to go to Caltrain. The Caltrain projects include installing a modernized signal system, the first steps in electrifying the Caltrain corridor, construction of grade separations in San Bruno, and improvements to Caltrain stations in San Francisco and San Jose. These projects are environmentally cleared, and ready to go, and could put thousands of people to work on the Peninsula.

An effort is underway in the Legislature to ensure these funds are available to Caltrain without predetermining the outcome of any alignment or design issues still facing high-speed rail.

My Bay Area congressional colleagues have joined me in signing a letter to Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood asking that he direct the Federal Railroad Administration take into account the ability of the Caltrain projects to put Americans to work and advance the interests of high-speed rail.

One thing is clear: We cannot lose Caltrain. This is a golden opportunity to do something positive for Caltrain and the Peninsula for now and for generations to come.